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ABSTRACT

Creative drama offers many techniques which provide a good way to approach curriculum goals. Introducing children to theater and play production in the classroom setting can create energy in the classroom, foster a sense of self-identification, and teach children to experientially appreciate drama as an art form. Multilevel learning is involved in theater production, including: (1) reading, memorizing and interpreting script; (2) writing notes and taking stage directions; (3) utilizing math concepts in building a set; (4) interdependence with fellow actors; (5) recognition of body language; and (6) use of voice through oral interpretation. Drama can also foster student motivation, through the excitement of organizing a play, directing, acting and developing scenes and characters. Steps to produce a play include reading the script orally, discussing and interpreting the script, and staging the play. (EF)

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# Theatre in the Classroom--A Creative Way to Teach and Learn.

by Lorie A. Annarella

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CS 510 373

# I. Theatre in the Classroom--A Creative Way To Teach and Learn

by Lorie A. Annaarella

"Often children's theatre (Theatre for Youth) and creative drama have been seen to oppose each other. Actually both spring from the same roots—the need of people to role play in order to measure themselves and their own experiences against those of others, not only to see where they are different, but also to discover how they are alike. In this way people achieve a sense of belonging, especially in those aspects of living which are not communicable by words alone" (Heathcote, 1971, p. 18).

Frequently teachers complain that there is so much curriculum to cover that the "fun" things (many times creative arts) can't be taught because of the need for teaching the basics—Reading, Writing and Math. Yet, these basics can be taught quite effectively through the use of creative arts in the classroom. I have always purported the use of creative drama methodology in the classroom. I believe there is no better way to teach curriculum goals than through the many techniques that creative drama has to offer. But another notable way to bring the gap between core subjects and the arts is the use of (Children's Theatre), which is now called Theatre for Youth. Producing a classroom drama which entails the reading, working and interpretation of script, helping children to develop characters, and having children create a set can all provide a resourceful way

for students to learn. Let us see how a scripted play can teach curriculum concepts as well as provide a healthful dose of theatre and drama in the everyday class.

### *A. Energy in the Classroom*

Introducing children to theatre and play production in the classroom setting can give a richness and energy to the quality of teaching. But energizing ones teaching is not the only plus of using play production in the classroom. Children enjoy watching plays because it can give them a sense of self-identification and validation of their role in life. "Theatre clarifies for the child the ramifications of the story and opens the way for his mind to leap ahead of the players in a stimulating shared experience, where, himself anonymous...the other world walled out, s/he focuses on characters caught in situations which require decisions and value judgments"(Henry, 1967, p.9). And though there is importance and validity in exposing children to watching a play and becoming engaged as an audience, having students actively participate in the development of a play can teach them to appreciate the value of the art form from an experiential position. Play production can also be beneficial as a classroom curriculum tool. Not to be confused with creative drama, the scripted play is a direct

introduction to play production and theatre arts in which students participate. Mc Caslin states, "The principal emphasis in children's theatre is upon the formal production of plays for children; the roles may be acted by either amateurs or professionals, children or adults, or a combination of both. Most children's theatre is director oriented, with memorized dialogue, scenery, and costumes playing important parts"(1968, p. 6). When students are engaged in a project in an experiential way, learning is taking place. High levels of energy must be expended in order to do the work required to produce a play. Students will best learn this through the organization of their teacher/director. When students are told that they will be performing a play, they will become engaged. It is up to the teacher/director to show them how to become engaged in an organized way so that the production will be a success. As teachers we can take the scripted play and turn it into a learning experience for our students.

**Learning from the Theatre Experience**

Often teachers complain that there is so much curriculum to cover that the "fun" things (many times creative arts) can't be taught because of need for teaching the basics—Reading, Writing and Math. Yet, these basics can be taught quite effectively

through the use of creative arts in the classroom. There is a multi-level of learning that goes into the production of a show. When students are involved in a production, they are reading, memorizing and interpreting script. They are writing notes and learning to take stage directions from the director. And they are certainly using math concepts when they are building a set.

On the stage as actors they are learning the responsibility of being there for their fellow actors. They learn also that ensemble (or small group) is important as well as whole group. Playing off another character through gesture and dialogue teaches them to focus and to read body language, and relegates the correct use of the voice through oral interpretation. Memorization is part of the learning experience of play production. The students will have to memorize the playwrights lines and will learn to give the correct cue line to ensure fluency and timing in the play. Students will learn that there is no one person alone that will make up a production, every player of the cast is important as well as all players behind the scenes.

### *B. Motivation in the Classroom*

One of the primary responsibility of the teacher is to motivate. When students are not interested in what is being taught, they

don't learn. To motivate students is to have a student focused curriculum; one in which the student is permitted to discover, ask questions and to progress in an inquiry approach to learning. Theatre production can provide this for the student. In presenting a play all cast members (students) become the primary focus of the production. When the play to be performed is chosen, the students will be asked not only to act in the production, but to help with, and perform in all aspects of the production. The teacher/director can get as elaborate or as minimal with the play production as they wish, but the prime reason for performing the play is to engage the students in an authentic, artistic theatre experience so that they can discover not only what goes into the development of a drama, but to form new insights to learning through direct involvement in theatre production. Theatre production thrives on a high level of energy. The excitement of organizing a play, directing, acting and developing scenes and characters can become a motivating element and a valuable tool for the teacher. The students will be engaged in a hands-on experiential effort of putting on a play, in which every member of the class will take an active part. Because students can choose production tasks in which they are most interested, they become more motivated.

Theatre Teaches Large and Small Group Participation

When the entire class becomes involved in producing a play there is whole group participation. Producing a play contains other aspects aside from acting. Students can be placed in cooperative learning groups that will consist of, and charge the technical aspects of the production. Some of these might be: lighting, set construction, costumes and if needed, programs. Students will learn how to cooperate in small groups as well as whole group participation. Everyone will have a job in connection with the play. "When all students are active participants, drama sessions are more productive and less chaotic"(Flynn, Carr, 1994, p. 39). There can be as many task oriented groups as the teacher/director wishes. As each of these groups work together students can become even more motivated and energized through the work that it takes to produce a successful play. And so we have our teacher/director as the facilitator or guide as the drama begins to develop.

### *C. Play Organization and the Teacher/Director*

When the teacher decides to have the class perform a play, the students begin first of all to read the script. The reading of the script is done orally by all students taking part in the production.

This is called the read through. After the play is read, questions about what the script contains are answered and discussed. Students will not only be reading the play, but they will be learning parts that the playwright has written and will be acting those parts out. In this instance, reading the literature goes to another level of interpretation for the student. The student will translate and internalize the script into a personal level of understanding. and present a replication of what is believed to be what the playwright is communicating. There is a personal interpretation and understanding of the text into a characterization. Students will be learning from reading and memorizing the dialogue of the text, and also experientially through movement and interpretation of what they feel the playwright has written and what they believe the character to be. This takes the student to a higher level of interpretation, beyond just reading and discussing the text. Students become actors when they are immersed in the text through an internalization of character, dialogue and spontaneous delivery of that action to the audience. During the production of the play, the student actors will become the characters they are portraying as they deliver memorized words of the playwright and their own interpretation of the character and scene. There should be a total commitment

of the class to the project. When this happens and you have a show, a kind of magic begins and only ends after the curtain falls.

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